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ABSTRACT

Reviews of research, studies of early readers, and investigations of emergent literacy uniformly conclude that parents' beliefs, aspirations, and actions affect their children's growth into and embracing of literacy. However, conflicting results call into question the utility of simply correlating race or various socioeconomic factors, such as parental level of education or family income, with reading achievement. Research indicates that parents of successful readers: (1) want their children to succeed; (2) impart a sense of the importance of education and high expectations to their children; (3) impart a love of reading and a sense of the value of reading to their children; (4) like, enjoy, and respect their children and are willing to spend time, money, and effort to nurture their literacy; (5) believe in the adage "the parent is the child's first teacher"; (6) know what is going on in their children's school and literacy lives; (7) believe that they can have an impact on their children's literacy development; (8) tend to provide literacy artifacts, especially children's materials, in their homes; (9) read to their children often; (10) serve as role models as readers themselves; and (11) provide effective literacy interactions which assist their children in learning how to construct meaning from text and to interact successfully in school settings. The parental role in the development of children who both can and will read is enormous. (Fifty-three references are attached.) (RS)

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A Portrait of Parents of Successful Readers

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Introduction

Parents play a crucial role in the development of children who have positive attitudes toward reading and who become successful readers. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson baldly state: "Reading begins at home." Reviews of research, studies of early readers, and investigations of emergent literacy uniformly conclude that parents' beliefs, aspirations, and actions affect their children's growth into and embracing of literacy.

In this chapter we will look at what research tells us about the nature of the role parents play in the development of children's interest in and attitude toward reading. The result of this review is a portrait of parents of successful readers.

I work from the viewpoint that children's interest and attitudes are affected by two major factors: first, the climate in the home which surrounds the child from birth and carries explicit and implicit messages about the value of reading, and second, the child's own competence in reading. Thus research about children's reading achievement is intertwined with information about parental roles in the development of children's interest in reading. As I discuss parents and their roles, emphasis will be placed on those kinds of environmental factors that can be altered, such as availability of literacy materials in the home, frequency of home literacy events, and, more difficult to change, the nature of parent-child literacy interactions and parents' attitudes toward their roles in their children's literacy development.

However, I will start with a brief look at two factors that cannot be changed or are at best difficult to change socioeconomic status (SES) and race. I want us to consider the research about the relationships between SES and race and literacy development in order to present a contemporary view of these relationships and to clear the air about this important issue. Then I will present 11 findings from the review as I draw the portrait of the parents of successful readers.

Clearing the Air: The Relationship between Socioeconomic Status, Race, and Reading Achievement and Interest

When researchers have investigated the relationship between socio-economic status or race and reading, the results have often been conflicting. For many years it was assumed that individuals who had low SES levels would also have lower levels of reading achievement and as a result would provide impoverished literacy environments for their children. Indeed, a great deal of research supports a relationship between SES and various reading measures. For example, Walberg and Tsai (1984), looking at NAEP data for 13 year-olds, found a significant relationship between reading achievement and SES. When studying data from 15 nations, Thorndike (1976) came to a similar conclusion. Neuman (1986) reports that children in homes with higher SES levels had more books, spent more time reading, and participated in more family discussions about books and

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magazines than did children at lower SES levels. Race has also been found related to reading achievement and parental expectations (cf., Walberg &Tsai, 1984).

On the other hand, a comparable body of research has not found a relationship between SES and a variety of reading measures. SES has not been found to be associated with early reading (Durkin, 1966; Torrey, 1979; White, 1982), attitude toward reading (Wigfield &Asher, 1984) or affective characteristics in general (Marjoribanks, 1979), type or amount of parental reading (Southgate, Arnold, & Johnson, 1981), or overall reading achievement (Dunn, 1981). Further, increasing evidence indicates that low SES parents do and can provide rich literacy environments for their children (cf., Ingham, 1981; Teale, 1986).

In examining the role of race in literacy environments, Anderson and Stokes (1984) found wide variation within ethnic groups. Where they did find trends along ethnic lines, these trends were in parent-child interactions. For example, Anderson and Stokes found that low income Anglo-American parents initiated literacy interactions more frequently than did low income Black or Mexican-American parents. (This finding corresponds to Heath's [1982] results.) However, Black and Mexican-American parents tended to spend more time in individual interactions with their children. Thus, the amount of time spent in parent-child literacy interactions was similar across ethnic groups. On the other hand, in comparing literacy artifacts and events in the homes of Anglo, Black, and Mexican-American preschoolers, Teale (1986) found no clear ethnic differences in literacy practices.

What can these contradictory findings mean? These conflicting results call into question the utility of simply correlating race or various SES factors, such as parental level of education or family income, with reading achievement. Increasingly, and especially as alternate research methods gain credibility, literacy investigators are suggesting that SES is at best what Clarke-Stewart and Apfel (1978) call "only a crude shorthand index of presumed differences in home environment" (p. 57) and that ethnicity is not an automatic indicator of culture. We are coming to understand that it is not what parents have as resources or what they "are" but what they do in their homes, the literacy environment, that has the most effect on their children's literacy development.

The rest of this chapter examines these literacy environments in order to determine how parents affect their children's interest and ability to succeed in reading.

Literacy Environments that Value and Encourage Reading

The Role of Parents' Beliefs and Attitudes

One assumption of this chapter is that parental beliefs and attitudes play a large role in shaping children's beliefs and attitudes, in molding interactions between parent and child, and in children's reading achievement.

Ample evidence exists that parents in general are interested in their children's success in school, particularly in reading. A constant theme in Downing's (1973) cross-national survey of literacy was the high degree of interest parents in most countries typically display in their children's reading and writing success. Williams and Stallworth (1983-1984, cited in Henderson, 1988) found parents eager to play a variety of roles in their children's literacy development. Fitzgerald, Spiegel, and Cunningham (1991) found both high and low literacy parents of entering kindergarten students to be very positive about their own roles in their children's literacy development.

However, having an interest in one's child's literacy development is apparently not enough to nurture that development. Parents of less successful readers have often been identified as valuing education and hoping that their children will do well (Heath, 1982; Hess & Shipman, 1968; Ingham, 1981). Interest alone cannot be the determining variable Other aspects of parental beliefs and attitudes must also be important.

A Profile of Beliefs and Attitudes of Parents of Successful Readers

Parents of successful readers (defined here as children who score well on reading achievement measures, who learn to read early, or who show high interest in reading as a leisure-time activity) have the following characteristics:

1. They want their children to succeed. Parental concern about their children's sucess in reading has been found to be strongly related to reading achievement in Japan (Nakano, 1957; Sakamoto, 1976), Scotland (Goodacre, 1973), England (Ingham, 1981), and the United States (Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Dave, 1963, White, 1982).

However, this does not mean that parents of less successful readers are necessarily disinterested in their children's success. Heath (1982) paints a profile of the Roadville and Trackton communities of the Carolina Piedmonts as places where school success is valued, but rarely achieved. Both Hess and Shipman (1968) and Ingham (1981) describe parents of less successful readers as caring but mired in a sense of helplessness, of lacking any sense of control over their children's success.

2. Parents of successful readers impart a sense of the importance of education to their children. They also impart high expectations to their children. Parents of successful readers let their children know that it is important to do well in school and that they are confident their offspring indeed will do well. Clay (1976) found that this emphasis on the importance of education was the distinguishing factor between the homes of Samoan children in New Zealand, who generally succeeded in learning to read, and those of Maori children, who had a better command of English but were often less successful readers. Dave (1963), in a United States study, and Marjoribanks (1979), in a summary of cross-national studies, both concluded that parents' desire that their children do well was the most important variable in children's reading achievement.

On the other hand, parents of less successful readers often have high aspirations for their children, but low expectations (Ingham, 1981; Scott-Jones, 1984; Wigfield &

Asher, 1984). They hope that their children will do well, but don't really believe that they will.

3. Parents of successful readers impart a love of reading and a sense of the value of reading to their children. Several researchers have noted the relationship between parents' enjoyment of reading and the likelihood that their children will also learn to enjoy reading (Neuman, 1986; Sauls, 1971). Ingham (1981) expresses the relationship thus:

It is as though the parent experiences so much joy in reading that he or she tries to make available the same experiences to the child and also causes the child to seek the experiences that give so much pleasure to a loved and respected person. Also, it is likely that the child receives a further reward in terms of the parents' satisfaction and admiration if the child reads well and shares the parents' excitement about books (p. 176).

4. These parents like, enjoy, and respect their children and they are willing to spend time, money, and effort to nurture their literacy. According to Ingham (1981), "the main strand that runs throughout all these aspects of the home lives of avid readers is that they know they are wanted, respected, cared for, and considered" (p. 232). She found that lower income parents of avid readers often made personal sacrifices to provide their children with nurturing literacy environments. Teale (1978) concluded that parents of early readers were concerned enough about their children to take the time needed to answer their questions and meet their emerging literacy needs. By contrast, Ingham also reported that parents of infrequent readers often considered money spent on books ill-spent.

5. Parents of successful readers believe in the adage "The parent is the child's first teacher." Dunn (1981) concluded that the most critical variable in kindergarteners' reading achievement was a parental "teaching set." Durkin (1966) found that fewer mothers of early readers believed that reading instruction ought to be left to the schools than did mothers of non-early readers, in spite of the fact that the prevailing wisdom of the time was that parental teaching of preschoolers might "damage" children. Plessas and Oakes (1964) reported that 80% of the parents of early readers in their sample had intentionally set out to teach their preschoolers to read.

Mothers of avid readers in Ingham's (1981) study didn't seem to think that this intentional nurturing of literacy was all that noteworthy. Ingham reports that the mothers tended to mention introducing their children to books in much the same way that they discussed providing them with a balanced diet or a warm room. Thus, to these mothers, providing for their children's literacy development was a natural part of nurturing their children.

However, parents of less successful readers tend not to believe that their own interventions as teacher or coach of their children will have any impact and they tend to be less actively involved in their children's literacy development than parents of successful readers. Heath (1982) summarizes the Trackton viewpoint of parental role as that of casual providers of experiences from which the child may or may not learn. She gives a particularly poignant quotation from a Trackton mother:

"Ain't no use me tellin' 'im: Learn this, learn that, what's this, what's that? He just gotta learn, gotta know; he see one thing one place one time, he know how it go, see sumpin' like it again, maybe it be the same , maybe it won't." (p. 67)

6. They know what is going on in their children's school and literacy lives. Sutton (1964) found a strong correlation between early reading and parents' interest in their

children's school progress. Ninety-six per cent of the parents of early readers maintained a high degree of contact with the school, whereas only 56% of non-early readers' parents did. Sakamoto (1976) relates the high rate of literacy success in Japan to parental interest. He reports that 45% of parents in one study knew every book that their children were currently reading and another 47% knew nearly all. Feitelson (1973) described a similar high degree of awareness among Israeli parents. On the other hand, Ingham (1981) reports that not one infrequent reader in her sample had a parent ever talk to the child about his or her schooling.

7. Parents of successful readers believe that they can have an impact on their children's literacy development and are aware of the impact they are having. Ingham (1981) reports that without exception parents of avid readers believed their efforts had an effect on their children's development of literacy. When Kastler, Roser, and Hoffman (1987) asked parents of successful first grade readers to describe their home literacy environments, four of the six most frequently mentioned events were parent-structured and three of the five most common attributions for children's success involved parental actions or beliefs.

Thus, when we examine the effects of parents' beliefs and attitudes on their children's reading achievement, we find the following: Parents of successful readers want their children to succeed, let them know that it is important that they succeed, and are confident that the children will succeed. Furthermore, these parents like and enjoy their children, know what is going on in their childrens'literacy lives, and believe that they as parents can make a difference.

Literacy Environments: What Goes on in the Home

What parents believe and their attitudes toward literacy are reflected in the literacy environments of their homes. An impressive body of research over several decades and in many countries has established the importance of those environments in children's literacy development. Home literacy environments have several components, and these components will be discussed in ascending order of importance: artifacts, events, and the nature of parent-child interactions.

Artifacts

One way to examine home literacy environments is to look at the presence of literacy artifacts in the home: books, newspapers, pencils and paper, letters, junk mail, and other print-related materials. Anderson and Stokes (1984) echo Teale's (1978) warning that literacy artifacts should not be equated solely with books, especially when discussing homes of the urban poor. Anderson and Stokes report that in such homes book-related literacy experiences form the minority of literacy events.

In spite of Anderson and Stokes' and Teale's warning, most research has concentrated on the presence of published literacy materials, such as books, newspapers, and magazines, with some attention to writing materials. Parents do think having books available to children is important. For example, when parents of incoming kindergartners were asked to rate the importance of various home literacy materials, children's books received the highest of all ratings (Fitzgerald, et al., 1991).

However, not all parents do provide books in the home. In Heath's (1982) Trackton community, lower-SES and black, there were no children's literacy artifacts

other than occasional children's Sunday School materials. McCormick and Mason (1986) found extreme group differences when comparing the number of alphabet books in homes of professional parents, university staff and student parents (designated mid-level SES), and parents on public aid. Forty-two percent of public-aid parents estimated that they had no alphabet books in the house, whereas the estimates were 13% for mid-level parents and 3% for professionals.

Writing materials seem to be available in most homes, although Teale (1986) found that in many of the low-income homes that he visited writing materials were often not readily accessible. Parents in the Fitzgerald et al. (1991) study rated pens, pencils, and markers second only to children's books and magazines in importance for preschoolers' literacy development. Paper was rated as next most important. Durkin's (1966) early readers were often described by their parents as "paper and pencil kids."

"Instructional" materials -- workbooks, flashcards, computer toys for reading and spelling -- are valued by some parents but not by others. Fitzgerald et al. (1991) found that parents with low literacy levels had a higher opinion of instructionally-oriented materials than did parents with high literacy levels.

Adult reading materials are available in most homes, although not all parents are aware of the role of adult materials in developing children's literacy. All of the low-income homes in Teale's (1986) study had newspapers and adult magazines, although several did not have many. TV Guide was a common fixture in most homes. However, low literacy parents in the Fitzgerald et al. study (1991) ranked adult literacy materials far behind children's in importance whereas the high literacy parents gave them almost equal rankings.

To extend our portrait of parents of successful readers, we therefore add:

8. Parents of successful readers tend to provide literacy artifacts, especially children's materials, in their homes.

Two final points need to be made about literacy artifacts: 1) The literacy artifacts described above are often very simple, inexpensive materials. Children's books, although they are often bought, need not be; they are readily available at little or no cost from public or school libraries. Thus low SES per se should not be considered an obstacle to having literacy materials in the home.

2) Both Teale (1978) and the parents in the Fitzgerald et al. (1991) study concluded that it's not what you have in the home that is important; it's what is done with the materials. We must look at literacy events and interactions.

Literacy Events

Recent research into home literacy environments has emphasized the social nature of literacy events. Parents often do set up activities or events primarily designed to teach the children something about literacy. Early research focused primarily on these formal literacy interactions and events and found that formal literacy events were (and are) apparently quite common in the lives of children who learn to read early (Durkin, 1996; Plessas & Oakes, 1964).

However, Teale and Sulzby report that by far the "vast majority of literacy experienced by young children is embedded in activities directed toward some goal beyond literacy itself" (1989, p. 3). Most literacy events in homes are informal rather than formal.

Indeed, because these kinds of literacy interactions are so much a part of everyday life, parents may not even be aware of the frequency of these events.

An emphasis on the importance of informal literacy events should not be construed as suggesting that naturally occurring literacy events are by themselves likely to be sufficient for a child to develop literacy. However, these events clearly play an important part in moving a child toward literacy. Teale (1982) suggests that social interactions with literacy might serve as inducers, as triggering events for the development of literacy. Durkin (1966) emphasizes the importance of both kinds of interactions: "Early interest in becoming a reader is as much 'caught' as 'taught'" (p. 95).

Children learn functions of literacy from observing literacy events in their environment. In fact, Teale and Sulzby (1989) assert that the key role parents play in literacy development is demonstration of uses of literacy.
What children may learn from these observations is shown by Southgate et al.'s (1981) research with average readers. The results indicated that young children are aware of the functional purposes of reading, but do not necessarily perceive it as a source of pleasure.

Research has often substantiated the impact of adults as literacy role models for their children (Durkin, 1966; Guthrie & Greaney, 1991; Ingham, 1981; Manning & Manning, 1984), although parental reading habits did not affect the amount of leisure reading of fifth graders in two studies (Neuman, 1986; O'Rourke, 1979).

Although many parents do read in front of their children, some parents are not aware of the importance of this modeling. None of the low literacy parents in the Fitzgerald et al. (1991) study ever mentioned any adult literacy event as important when responding to open-ended questions about preschoolers' literacy development.

Although adult role modeling is important, the most frequently researched home literacy event has been reading to children. The research is clear that reading to children is related to their reading achievement, early development of literacy, and interest in reading (Durkin, 1966; Ingham, 1981; Kastler, et al., 1987; Neuman, 1986; Plessas & Oakes, 1964; Teale, 1978, 1984).

Many if not most parents are aware of the importance of reading to their children. Forty-four of the 49 parents in Durkin's (1966) California study said that their children's curiosity about reading came from being read to at home and all of the parents of early readers in her New York sample read to their children. For both high and low literacy parents in the Fitzgerald et al. (1991) study, listening to stories read was the most highly rated and most frequently mentioned literacy event.

However, even if most parents are aware of the value of reading to their children, not all do. Only 73% of the parents of non-early readers in Durkin's study (1966) read to their children. Thomas (1985) found a similar pattern of less frequent reading to children among parents of non-early readers. Heath (1982) reports that in Trackton there was no bedtime story; parents rarely if ever read to their children. Ingham's (1981) infrequent readers and their parents both reported that the parents never read to the children. Rossman (1974), investigating remedial high school readers, and Ryan (1977), looking at college freshman in remedial English classes, both reported parents had not read to their subjects as children.

This review of literacy events adds a bit more to our parental portrait. For parents of successful readers

9. They read to their children often.
10. They serve as role models as readers themselves.

The Nature of Effective Literacy Interactions

Earlier I suggested that it wasn't what you had in the home that made a difference in literacy development, but what you did with what you had. Next, two complementary perspectives will be presented to explain the nature of effective literacy interactions: viewing interactions as facilitating construction of meaning vs. viewing them as precursors or preparation for school interactions.

The Constructivist Viewpoint

This viewpoint draws upon the work of Bloome (1985), Ninio and Bruner (1978), Snow (1983), and Thomas (1985), among others. Thomas (1985) uses Snow's (1983) framework for parent-child interactions for language development to suggest a framework for examining parent-child interactions that help children learn to construct meaning from text. Snow suggests that three parental procedures facilitate language development: semantic contingency, scaffolding, and accountability.

Semantic contingency involves an adult (or other knowledgeable individual) expanding on topics introduced by the child and answering the child's questions. Thomas (1985) found that early reader studies consistently report that someone answered early readers' questions about text. Through scaffolding adults adjust their demands of the child to match what the child can do, thus reducing uncertainty and providing what Mason and Allen describe as "just enough support ... to enable [the child] to succeed, but no more" (1986, p. 28). It is through scaffolding that the adult models mature performance of the task. Scaffolding has often been associated with successful development of literacy (Flood, 1977; Mason & Allen, 1986; Teale &Sulzby, 1989). By contrast, Heath (1982) found that Roadtown and Trackton parents, whose children often are less successful in school, did not provide scaffolding during parent-child interactions, whereas Maintown parents did.

Accountability means that parents require children to complete literacy tasks of which they are capable. Several researchers suggest that parents are uniquely qualified for this role because they are likely to be keenly aware of their children's needs and abilities and serve as responsive mediators between children and text (Clarke-Stewart & Apfel, 1978; Gordon, 1976; Teale, 1978; Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

Thus, a picture emerges of interactions in which the child is an engaged, active participant in the construction of meaning from text. The child and parent are involved in joint problem-solving through guided participation, through cooperative negotiation of meaning.

Parent-Child Interactions as Precursors of School Interactions

A second, and complementary perspective, is that effective parent-child literacy interactions serve to prepare the child for the kinds of interactions which take place in and are rewarded in school.

Heath's (1982) work has been seminal in viewing parent-child interactions during story reading as preparation for school. She describes what Maintown children learn from interactions in two ways. First, Heath identifies a pattern of interaction called "what-explanations" which involves "asking what the topic is, establishing it as predictable and recognizing it in new situational contexts by classifying and categorizing it in our mind

with other phenomena". This pattern, Heath claims, is exactly the pattern which is "replayed" in schools daily. Maintown children are exposed to "what-explanations" before school during storyreading; Trackton children are not.

The second set of Maintown learnings Heath describes concerns rules for literacy events. Starting in infancy, children gradually learn to give attention to books and to information that comes from books; to attend to and ask questions about books. Again, these are the kinds of rules and book interactions that will be rewarded in school, and Roadtown and Trackton children come to school with a different set of rules.
Thus,

11. Parents of successful readers provide effective literacy interactions which assist their children in learning how to construct meaning from text and to interact successfully in school settings.

Summary and Conclusions

Two portraits have emerged from this examination of parents' role in literacy development and interest. The first is a picture of a home literacy culture which immerses the child in reading and writing, both by design and by the circumstances of everyday living. Resnick (1987) contends that learning to read is a socio-cultural process, and that children develop literacy and an understanding of the purposes and pleasures of reading through serving apprenticeships while immersed in literacy environments. We have seen that some literacy environments are more effective than others, and that the richness of a literacy environment has less to do with money and socioeconomic status than with parental beiefs, attitudes, and actions.

The second portrait is that of parents of successful readers. Parents whose children learn to read well and who love reading have generally created rich literacy enviroments. These parents value reading and education and hope and expect that their children will develop the same values. These high expecations reflect the love and respect that the parents have for their children. Further, parents of successful readers are aware of the importance of their own efforts in creating effective literacy envirnoments. Because of the value they place on reading and on their children, these parents are willing to make the effort needed to create rich literacy environments.

The parental role in the development of children who both can and will read is enormous. As literacy educators, we now have an understanding of this role. It is heartening that so many parents play this role well. It is also encouraging to find that income level and race are not necessarily determinants of how well parents will play this role. Still, a great deal needs to be done to assist many parents in providing more effective home literacy environments. A place to start is in parental beliefs and attitudes, especially in their understanding of their own role in their children's literacy development.

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